

Strong Case Against Ray, Though Theories Differ

By Michael Dorman

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Nashville, Tenn. — Built brick by brick from chunks of tangible evidence and slivers of the circumstantial, the case against James Earl Ray in the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. seems formidable. Ray himself concedes he was involved in the murder, although he denies pulling the trigger and claims he was a mere dupe.

The larger question of whether Ray committed the murder alone, as charged, poses more difficult questions. Numerous conspiracy theories have surrounded the case from the beginning and seem to multiply with the passing years. The U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1978, after a two-year study, that Ray had killed King and that "there is a likelihood" he did so as a result of a conspiracy.

The evidence:

Ray rented a room in a boarding house overlooking a Memphis motel where King was staying. The bullet that killed King was apparently fired from a bathroom window in the boarding house. Other boarders said Ray had spent many minutes locked in that bathroom near the time of the assassination. His fingerprints were found near the window and in other parts of the boarding house, as well as on a pair of binoculars left behind when he fled immediately after the shooting.

A witness told of seeing him rush out of the rooming house. Discarded on a sidewalk near where his car had been parked were the murder weapon — a .30-06 Remington rifle — and a transistor radio. Investigators traced the rifle to Ray, and he admits buying it. The radio was imprinted with Ray's convict number from a Missouri prison he had escaped a year earlier.

Asked in a 1993 interview why an experienced — if small-time — criminal would leave such an incriminating trail of evidence, Ray replied: "If I knew I was going to get a murder case against me, I wouldn't have left those fingerprints and all that. But I didn't know that."

There is also circumstantial evidence that Ray

stalked King in the days preceding the assassination. It is known that Ray was in Atlanta, Memphis and Selma, Ala., on days when King was there over a period of several weeks before his death, but it is not known why. Ray contends it was coincidence.

As for why Ray might have killed King, members of his family have said he has been "wild" against blacks all his life — growing up in sections of Illinois and Missouri with histories of racial discord. Records at the U.S. Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kan., where Ray served time in the 1950s for cashing stolen postal money orders, show he rejected an offer for a transfer to the softer life of a prison honor farm because dormitories there were desegregated.

The conspiracy theories:

In speculating on the "likelihood" that Ray took part in a conspiracy to kill King, the House Select Committee on Assassinations conjectured that the plot involved a group of St. Louis racists. But Ray, in the 1993 interview, denied that. "I was never approached by any of those people in St. Louis identified by the committee," he said. "I knew just one of them. He was in prison with me once. But I don't think I talked to him four times in my whole life, and never about any assassination."

Ray has stuck to his story that a mystery man named Raoul drew him into a murder plot. Asked why nobody has found a trace of Raoul in more than a quarter-century, he contended the answer lay in secret government files. "If they open the files and give me a new trial, I know I can win the case," he said.

Many conspiracy theorists have blamed the murder on the FBI — pointing to the bureau spying on King, leaking information about his purported extramarital affairs and the late FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover's known hatred for King. But no credible evidence has been produced to support such a theory.

Some theories hang on the premise that there must have been a conspiracy because Ray, on his own,

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could not have afforded his extensive getaway travels. But FBI agents discovered Ray was a frugal man who made his money last. They also received information from Canadian authorities that Ray had apparently pulled several holdups in Montreal, yielding no more than a few thousand dollars but enough to finance his trip to London and some expenses there.

As for the theories blaming the assassination on white racists, black extremists and sundry others, no specific individuals have been identified as credible suspects and no tangible evidence has been offered. Much of the conspiracy theorists' current activity is preoccupied with poking holes in the body of evidence indicating Ray committed the crime alone.

The chances are Ray will carry the answers to many of these questions to his grave — a grave that appears to beckon evermore insistently with each passing day.